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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to describe teachers' perceptions and experiences in implementing whole language activities in their kindergarten and elementary classrooms. Ten teachers who were part of a pilot whole language program participated in the study. Throughout the 1989-1990 school term, data were collected through teacher questionnaires distributed every six weeks. The focus of the questionnaires was on teachers' selection of whole language activities and their evaluation of the success of the activities in their classrooms. Teachers' perspectives on student responses to changes in learning activities and parent responses to the curriculum were also examined. Teachers reported increased frequency in using specific whole language activities throughout the year, while continuing to use some subskill activities. The management of time and the necessity for creating their own teaching materials were frequently mentioned as problems in implementing whole language activities. Assessment of progress was frequently mentioned as a source of difficulty. During the course of the year, teachers voiced fewer concerns and problems and enthusiastically described their children's involvement in whole language activities. (Appendixes include two teacher questionnaires.) (Author)

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IMPLEMENTING CHANGES IN READING INSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to describe teachers' perceptions and experiences in implementing whole language activities in their kindergarten and elementary classrooms. Ten teachers who were part of a pilot program of whole language participated in the study.

Throughout the 1989-1990 school term, data was collected through teacher questionnaires distributed every six weeks. The focus of the questionnaires was on teachers' selection of whole language activities and their evaluation of the success of the respective activities in their classrooms. Teachers' perspectives on student responses to changes in learning activities and parent responses to the curriculum were also examined.

Teachers reported increased frequency in using specific whole language activities throughout the year, while continuing to use some subskill activities. The management of time and the necessity for creating their own teaching materials were frequently mentioned as problems in implementing whole language activities. Assessment of progress was frequently mentioned as a source of difficulty. During the course of the year, teachers voiced fewer concerns and problems, and enthusiastically described their children's involvement in whole language activities.

IMPLEMENTING CHANGES IN READING INSTRUCTION

The current movement to incorporate more holistic language activities into elementary classrooms is sometimes greeted by guarded optimism among seasoned classroom teachers. "It sounds like a good idea... but will it really work?...How will I manage it?...How will I begin?" Such was the reaction of teachers in Berkeley School District #87, when changes in the traditional reading curriculum were proposed.

Teachers and administrators in the Berkeley school district, in a suburb west of Chicago, began to explore the whole language approach during the 1988-89 school term, having become dissatisfied with their current basal reading program which placed heavy emphasis on reading subskills. Whole language was defined as an instructional approach that integrated reading, writing, listening, and speaking, with an emphasis on comprehension and the communication of meaning, not only in the language arts, but in other curricular areas as well (e.g. science, social studies).

At the end of the 1988-89 school year, the school district became committed to making a change to more holistic literacy instruction. Plans were made to pilot two literature-based reading programs and provide numerous opportunities (classes and inservice programs) for acquainting teachers with whole language philosophy, theory, and techniques.

Recent descriptions of schools making the transition to whole language have focused on one grade level (Rasala, 1989), studies of individual teachers over several years (Heald-Taylor,

1989; Routman, 1988), or district-wide implementation of whole language during one school year (Ridley, 1990). Each of these studies have contributed to an awareness that the transition to whole language is a complex process and cannot be accomplished in one academic year. Additionally, teachers who had a thorough understanding of the theoretical foundations of the whole language approach made the transition easier (Ridley, 1990; Neumann, 1985).

None of the above studies, however, focused on the frequency with which whole language activities are used in the classroom. The purpose of this study was to examine teachers' implementation of whole language activities (i.e. what activities were used and how often they were used) and their experiences in transitioning to a whole language reading curriculum.

Making the transition to new curricula can often be complicated by a lack of information on how recommended practices can be implemented on a daily basis in the complex social environment of the classroom (Duffy, 1982).

We decided to document the use of specific whole language activities in (volunteer) classrooms involved in the pilot project and to provide the teachers with opportunity to periodically reflect on their use of whole language techniques. Such information would allow formative and summative data on which techniques were being used and the amount of success teachers felt they were experiencing in making the transition to whole language instruction. This information could then be shared with teachers and administrators in the school district as the whole language curriculum was implemented by more teachers

during the subsequent year.

Method

Sample of teachers. In the fall of 1989, prior to the beginning of the school term, a meeting was held for teachers who had volunteered to participate in the pilot. At this point the whole language implementation study was described and the teachers were invited to participate. Fifteen teachers originally indicated a willingness to be a part of the study. Ten teachers completed each of the six questionnaires distributed throughout the year. Nine of the teachers were from primary classrooms (K-2); one teacher was from an upper-elementary room (grades 6-8). Since there was only one upper-elementary teacher, and since reading instruction in upper grades differs significantly from beginning reading instruction, that data was dropped from analysis.

Teachers in this study had participated in a week-long whole language seminar conducted by their school district during the summer of 1989. In addition the school district's reading coordinator and "Reading and Language Arts Project Committee" provided periodic inservices throughout the school term, during which time research on whole language was presented and discussed.

Peer networking sessions (six throughout the year) were also held. These sessions were devoted to sharing ideas, supporting each other, and searching for answers to questions as they arose. (See Neumann, 1985, for further description of support/study groups.)

Questionnaires. Two questionnaires were developed: a frequency of activities questionnaire and an evaluative questionnaire (see Appendices A and B). The frequency questionnaire focused on the frequency with which specific whole language activities, and traditional subskill activities were used (see askerisks on Appendix A items for subskill activities; items without askerisks are whole language activities). The categorization of activities was based on a review of literature on whole language and traditional subskill activities (Rasala, 1989; Heald-Taylor, 1989; Jewell & Zintz, 1986). The subskill activities were included to determine whether teachers continued to use certain traditional reading and writing activities while making a transition to more holistic techniques as has been reported by others (Heald-Taylor, 1989).

The evaluative questionnaire asked which techniques the teachers had been using, which new techniques were used, how children responded, what success was seen, and whether parents had responded to the different approach to their child's reading and writing instruction. There was also opportunity for teachers to indicate any problems they were having in implementing whole language activities.

Procedures

Throughout the 1989-1990 school term, questionnaires were distributed approximately every six weeks. The questionnaires were alternated so that each was completed three times.

Frequency questionnaire. The frequency questionnaire was distributed in August, November, and March. The August

collection asked teachers to predict how frequently they would use specific learning activities (whole language and subskills). A similar questionnaire was distributed in November and March which asked how frequently teachers had been using the activities in their classrooms (See Appendix A).

Evaluative questionnaire. The evaluative questionnaire (Appendix B) was also distributed three times: early October, early February, and mid-May.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Teachers' predictions of activity frequency were the basis for examining change. Predictions involve teachers' individual expectations of what activities would work (i.e. fit into classroom structure, meet the needs of students, and provide opportunity for learning). Although teachers were hesitant to make predictions prior to meeting with their classes, we encouraged them to predict the frequency of use of the selected activities, to provide a basis for examining change throughout the year.

Three patterns of use were represented in the data: (1) Activities initially predicted to be used frequently and subsequently reported to have frequent use in November and March; (2) Activities initially predicted to be used infrequently and subsequently reported to have infrequent use in November and March; and (3) Activities that were used with greater frequency than predicted in August. In determining frequent and infrequent use categories were collapsed: frequent use = daily to 2-3 times/week, and infrequent use = never, rarely, once/month.

Each of these three patterns were representative of both whole language and subskill activities. Instructional activities in each classroom remained a mix of whole language and subskills throughout the year, similar to results reported by Heald-Taylor (1989). The patterns described below represent responses by five (56%) or more of the nine teachers in the study. The remainder of the data indicated individual patterns of activity use, suggesting that the transition to a whole language approach may have been influenced by factors not studied in this project (Authors, in progress).

Frequent activities. Whole language activities predicted to have frequent use (daily or 2-3 times per week) and used frequently as reported by 5 or more of the nine teachers included: writing original sentences and paragraphs, using invented spelling, teacher-read literature, sustained silent reading (SSR), children sharing/reading trade books together, and oral discussion of content-text based questions (questions found in content text).

Certain subskill activities were also predicted to have frequent use (daily or 2-3 times per week) in August and were reported by 5 or more of the nine teachers to have frequent use in November and March. These activities included: penmanship practice, copying from the board, practicing spelling lessons, answering basal questions orally, and completing workbooks.

Infrequent use. Four whole language activities were initially predicted for infrequent use (once/month + rarely + never) and subsequently reported to have been used infrequently

in November and March by five or more of the nine teachers: writing answers to content area questions, writing notes to other students, writing book reports, and performing plays. Only one subskill activity was predicted, and subsequently reported to have infrequent use by five or more teachers: writing answers to basal questions.

Changes in activity frequency. In addition to examining the data for changes in activity frequency reported by five or more of the teachers, we also looked for changes on an individual basis. All of the teachers reported an increase in the use of one or more whole language activities from their August prediction to reported use in March. The average number of activities reported to have increased for each teacher was 4.8 (SD=2.5). The number of activities reported to have increased ranged from nine activities for one teacher to two activities reported by two teachers. For example, one teacher predicted sustained silent reading would never be used in her classroom; however, in March daily use of sustained silent reading was reported. Another teacher predicted writing original stories and invented spelling would be used rarely or never at the August collection, and in March reported daily use of these activities. Thus, in some classrooms there was a dramatic change in the type of literacy activities, while in other classrooms less change occurred.

Increases in frequency were reported for sixteen of the eighteen whole language activities. (Students sharing trade books and show 'n tell showed no increase.) The activities reported by five or more of the teachers to have increased were: writing

original stories, using invented spelling, and teacher-student conferences over students' writing.

In contrast, subskill activities were reported to have increased only slightly. No increase in use in any subskill activity was reported by two teachers. The number of subskill activities reported to have increased in frequency for each teacher ranged from one to two activities (mean 1.2, SD=.83). No strong pattern of increase was found in the type of subskill activities. No increase was reported for the frequency of spelling tests or round robin reading of a basal. Of the seven remaining activities, increases were reported by only one or two teachers.

Summary of frequency data. Several conclusions are suggested by these results. Teachers' predicted use of some activities prior to beginning school in the fall was directly related to their actual use. This implies that new instructional techniques or activities should be introduced to teachers prior to beginning the fall school term. This may be especially true for veteran teachers who have established classroom routines and may favor particular classroom activities.

While teachers continued to use some subskill activities in their classrooms throughout the year, teachers also reported increased frequency of whole language activities. Changing to the whole language approach in these classrooms was gradual and occurred throughout the year, at varying degrees in each classroom.

Teachers appeared to be selective in their use of the various activities. Some activities were predicted to be used

and were used more frequently. Teachers also anticipated and reported certain activities having infrequent use.

Evaluative Questionnaire

When asked to indicate the whole language activities they had recently used, teachers named many of the same activities included on the Frequency Questionnaire, as well as other whole language activities, e.g. language experience stories, daily journals, integrating language arts in science and social studies through literature and writing activities.

Teachers each indicated between two and seven new activities in October, one to two new activities in February and none to three new activities in May. This suggests that teachers were trying more new activities earlier in the school year. Towards the end of the school year few new activities were being introduced in their classroom. Support for classroom innovation, seems highest in summer. Implementation of new ideas is highest during the fall and following winter, since that was found to be the time during which most new activities were introduced.

Teachers' responses indicated a variety of concerns as well as evidence of success in introducing and using whole language activities.

Problems with implementation. When asked to describe any problems they had in implementing whole language activities, the management of time and the necessity for creating their own teaching materials were frequently mentioned throughout the entire school term.

Early in the year, one teacher described her area of

difficulty in the following: "Fatigue! I feel this [whole language approach] is great--but I'm always preparing. I'm always organizing, and I'm always behind." When responding to the final questionnaire, this teacher's comment reflected her acceptance of the activity level that sometimes comes with this method: "A mess on my desk always!--but I'll never teach any other way. I want to keep on adding to what I am learning."

Other teachers identified specific activities as being more difficult to implement. Sometimes children appeared reluctant to attempt spelling on their own--wanting the teacher to spell words for them so they would be "right."

Several teachers felt the whole language approach did not provide enough attention to specific knowledge about letter-sound relationships. They began, then, to incorporate some formal instruction in phonics.

Another teacher described her need to alter lesson length to fit the listening comprehension abilities of her students, who initially became restless and inattentive when she was attempting to write an experience story with the whole class.

Assessment was also frequently mentioned as a source of difficulty. It was not that the teachers could not see growth or change in the children's abilities. They were unsure as to how to systematically quantify growth (in ways others would consider acceptable) when it came time for giving the children "grades" for report cards. (This district was also reevaluating their use of traditional letter grades on the periodic report cards, and field testing alternative ways of reporting student progress.)

Evidence of successful implementation of whole language activities was expressed in teachers' comments about the children's and parents' responses to the curriculum change.

Children's responses. Throughout the entire year and at every grade level, teachers mentioned that their children were enthusiastic and excited about the new reading and writing activities in their classrooms. A sampling of teachers' comments follows:

In October, a junior primary (transitional K-1 room) teacher wrote:

> [The children responded] "wonderfully. They are very enthusiastic. They love to read the stories, that I've read to them, over and over to themselves, together (in pairs, etc.) taking turns."

In February a second grade teacher commented:

> "They are a very happy bunch! They really seem hooked on reading--I catch them reading when their assignment is something else! I pretend I don't see and let them go on reading. All but four students wrote stories for the Young Authors Contest."

At the end of the term (in May), a second grade teacher characterized the children's responses to her whole language curriculum with the following:

> "Everyone shows great interest. Fewer behavior problems. Everyone is relaxed."

Whole language classrooms were also described as having

fewer discipline problems during an informal meeting with one of the building principals.

Parent responses. Feedback from the parents varied. Several teachers reported that they received "no feedback." A few teachers reported that parents said they could see increases in their children's reading ability and motivation to read, e.g. "They noticed how much their children love books and are reading at home. I think the parents are more excited [about the program] because their children are excited." Another teacher wrote: "At conference time two parents said, "My child won't let me read ....he wants to do the reading (himself)."

Summary of evaluative data. The transition to using whole language techniques has been described as requiring time (Heald-Taylor, 1989; Rasala, 1989). Completing the transition seems to require more than one school year. Yet, during one year of making the transition, teachers in our study gradually voiced fewer concerns and problems. They enthusiastically described their children's involvement in becoming literate. The value of the whole language curriculum for this group of teachers can be seen in the following comments about their children's literacy-related behaviors at the end of the school year:

Junior-primary (transitional K-1) teacher:

> "The children's writing and spelling have improved greatly. If they can't spell it they sound it out, but many are using their pictionaries and self-made dictionaries. They are reading and understanding what they have read. They are asking each other questions about what would you do in that situation, etc."

Kindergarten teacher:

"The children just love to read. I notice that they are sounding out letters more. They are using contextual clues also. I get so excited when my students read poems without my help. They get excited, too."

First grade teacher:

"[My] children are enthusiastic about reading. They enjoy stories and are not bored...They read and understand vocabulary better ...can read big words on stories made up on charts the first time through! ...can read new books faster."

Second grade teacher:

"My students love to read. They are also becoming accomplished writers. They particularly enjoy shared reading and writing. They often write at home and bring in stories to share with the class. They love reading whole works of authors."

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In our study curriculum change is still in its beginning stages. It is occurring in gradual amounts and is characterized by individual variations. Some teachers introduced many activities that could be characterized as whole language, and frequently used them in their classrooms. Other teachers used fewer whole language activities. The important point is that whole language activities were used with increasing frequency in all classrooms. Certain whole language activities were used more

frequently than the more traditional, subskill activities by a majority of the teachers throughout the year.

Teachers' expectations for using specific learning activities (whole language and subskill) appeared to be related to actual use several months later. This finding along with the finding that more new activities were introduced early on in the school year, supports the practice of providing inservices and other professional development opportunities in the months preceding and at the beginning of the school year.

Changing the way in which young children formally learn about reading and writing is possible. Teachers in this study have provided the evidence. Although the transition to whole language instruction in these classrooms was gradual, the enthusiasm of the teachers and their young learners strengthened and reinforced the new ways of learning about reading and writing.

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APPENDIX A

TEACHER QUESTIONNAIRE 89-B2

rade level:_____Mother's maiden name:_____School:_____Date:_____
ndicate the current frequency of each of the following activities in your classroom:

tudent Activity	daily	2-3 times/week	once/week	2-3/month	once/month	rarely	never
. penmanship practice *							
. copying from board*							
. completing workbooks *							
. writing original entences, paragraphs							
. writing original tories							
. using invented spelling							
. writing answers to asal story questions*							
. writing answers to content area text questions							
. writing notes to ther students							
0.writing notes to parents or teacher							
1.writing/illustrating book reports							
2.dictating stories							
3.practicing spelling lessons *							
4.taking spelling tests *							
5.teacher-student conferences over student's writing							

--continued-back side

Activity	daily	2-3 times/week	once/week	2-3 times/month	once/month	rarely	never
16. teacher reads story/ literature							
17. students take turns reading from basal *							
18. students take turns * reading from content area text							
19. sustained silent reading							
20. students looking at, or reading trade books together							
21. students checking out library books							
22. students sharing/ reading own compositions							
23. answering questions orally over basal stories *							
24. answering questions orally over content area text							
25. "show & tell", whole class sharing							
26. performing plays							
27. role-playing scenes from basal stories							

--Please place your completed questionnaire in the envelope provided and return it to Monica Iacono at Sunnyside School by _____. Thank you!

* ... the analysis. Remaining items were

APPENDIX B

Teacher Questionnaire 89-B

Grade level:_____ Mother's maiden name:_____
School:_____ Date:_____

1. List the whole language techniques you have used during the past six weeks.

2. What evidence do you have that each of the above techniques was successful? (give examples, etc.)

3. What new (previously not used by you) whole language techniques did you use during the past six weeks?

4. How have children in your classroom responded to the whole language activities? (give specific examples)

5. How have parents of children in your classroom responded to the whole language activities? (give specific examples)

6. Describe any problems you have had implementing whole language techniques/activities.

7. Any additional comments?